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A group of state and municipal officials are working on a project they hope will change the Internet landscape in Connecticut: a fiber optic network that will offer broadband Internet service 100 times faster than average current speeds to every household in the state.

Conceived last year, the CT Gig Project aims to use widely available, 1 gigabyte Internet service as a way to lure more businesses to the state, especially the high-tech firms the state covets, and at the same time offer broadband service to families who may not be able to afford it at current rates. The average household Internet connections are now about 9 megabytes per second.

The effort has so far faced opposition from business lobbyists and broadband providers who worry about potential taxpayer costs and don't want to see their established business models disrupted.

While the planning continues — many state and city officials are optimistic about a potential agreement with MacQuarie Capital to finance the new infrastructure — the debate raises questions about the role of local and state governments in an increasingly digital world.

The CT Gig Project began last summer when Consumer Counsel Elin Katz and Bill Vallee, her office's broadband policy coordinator, began a series of discussions with the state's business community about Internet access. The results of those conversations were telling, Katz said.

"We got an earful that prices were too high, speeds were too low. If you needed gigabit or higher speeds, it was incredibly expensive and difficult to obtain. Prices were in the thousands to get gigabit speeds, and it took months and months, sometimes even longer, of negotiations to make that happen," Katz said.

Soon after, Katz and Vallee began talking with a group of municipal leaders and, eventually, several banded together to send out a "request for qualifications" asking companies to submit bids to build a gigabit infrastructure.

While most of the project involves agreements, funding and construction on the municipal level, the effort got a boost when the General Assembly passed legislation creating the Office for Broadband Advocacy.

Now, individual municipalities are considering financing agreements. MacQuarie Capital's proposal is the front runner. That plan creates a "public-private partnership" in which MacQuarie provides the funding to build the gigabit infrastructure, and cities and towns pay MacQuarie back over 30 years, rather than the usual municipal bond period of 15 or 20 years.

With the effort occurring largely on a municipal level, though, cities and towns must work jointly to approve unified plan. New Haven, Stamford and West Hartford are among the municipal partners in the CT Gig Project. One proposal, which New Haven Controller Daryl Jones said is expected to be considered by a city council subcommittee in September, involves creating an interlocal council for negotiations. MacQuarie wants to construct the network for at least 100,000 households.

Before any construction can begin, a feasibility study would have to be conducted.

Opposition

The effort has its detractors. Paul Cianelli, CEO of the New England Cable and Telecommunications Association, said any taxpayer-sponsored effort to create a gigabit infrastructure is unnecessary and potentially disastrous.

"We are not opposed to competition. We are only opposed to government subsidies or loan guarantees, and it's not a good model going forward. I don't think either the state or the municipalities are in a financial position to sustain substantial losses going forward," Cianelli said.

Eric Brown, associate counsel of the Connecticut Business & Industry Association, was critical of any plan that involves putting taxpayers on the hook for a service that is already available on the open market.

"Connecticut, the first gigabit state, is a nice bumper sticker, but it's a very expensive bumper sticker," Brown said.

The plans being discussed involve a government-subsidized effort to install the fiber optic infrastructure. All Internet providers would be given access to the network and compete against each other in the price and plans offered to consumers.

Jones estimated that the MacQuarie agreement would cost individual taxpayers roughly $20 a month. Both Cianelli and Brown predicted more expenses that are not immediately apparent.

State officials see the plan as a way to revitalize Connecticut's economy, develop the biotechnology sector and stem the exodus of high-tech companies from the state.

"There are good ideas that are leaving Connecticut every day, and one of the reasons they're leaving — not the only one — is because of the lack of technology in this area," said state Comptroller Kevin Lembo, one of the plan's chief advocates.

Katz said it's important for the government to take a leading role.

"It is the role of local government and state government to make sure we're doing whatever we can to get essential services to all citizens," Katz said.

Supporters say broadband Internet service should be considered an essential utility. "Internet is just as important, if not becoming more important, as water and electricity," Jones said.

But Cianelli said that comparison is faulty.

"This is a risky business. This is not building the only water system. It's not building roads or bridges where there's nobody else. You already have a substantial system," he said.

Critics also argue that, for the vast majority of people, the ultra-high speed connection is unnecessary. Supporters respond by saying that many businesses in Connecticut need that kind of connection, which is too expensive under the current system, and that, while it may seem far-flung, ultra-high speeds may be necessary in the near future.

"You might not need a gig now, but you will in five years," Jones said.

Several cities around the country have already started gigabit-style arrangements, but there has yet to be an entire state to adopt such a model. Still, with a piecemeal, municipality by municipality approach, it might take a while for the system to come together.

"If you want to provide gigabit service or higher in five years, you have to make that decision now," Katz said. "These things take a long time. It's a major infrastructure project."